

Success Story Guidelines for USAID partners

How to Tell Our Stories

The formula is simple: **use powerful statistics**; communicate **progress**; and bring it to life with a **personal narrative**.

The best short stories typically include both a human interest lead that illustrates how a project has improved people's lives or made a difference in the host country and results to back up our claim to success.

Stories must contain beneficiaries and beneficiary quotes. These stories are not mere program descriptions, but a real life example of the good work of our programs through the lens of the people affected by them.

Outline

The story should follow the outline below: (Word count: should not exceed 500-800 words.)

Headline: A good headline or title is simple, jargon-free, and has impact; it summarizes the story concisely and includes action verbs that bring the story to life.

For example:

"Cocoa Brings Cash, Creates Better Conditions for Farmer Families"

Body: The first paragraphs should showcase the challenge encountered and the context of the foreign assistance program.

For example:

"Even with bumper crops and well-laden trees, farmer Nguyen Van Tri's cashew income always fell short. Profits were never enough to feed and care for his wife, seven children and parents, and he had to moonlight as a seasonal farm hand just to make ends meet."

Tri lives in Ea H'leo district of Dak Lak Province in the Central Highlands, one of the poorest and most mountainous areas in Vietnam. Of the district's 120,000, 40 percent are ethnic minorities often economically marginalized, and 20 percent live in poverty. On their plot of two hectares nestled between rolling hills, Tri's family used to only plant cashew trees. In the past, the cashew plants would produce about 600 kg of fruit, earning him less than VND10 million (\$500). Without outside work he was unable to cover living costs and education fees for his children."

After you start with this **human-interest bang**, describe what actions were taken, and the result. What changed for the person or community? What was learned?

For example:

"The answer for Tri was not to plant more cashews, but to branch out into another crop - cocoa. In 2009, USAID and non-governmental organizations and industry and private partners, began activities in the Ea H'leo district. They trained local farmers on cocoa cultivation techniques and distributed

cocoa seedlings.

Encouraged by project staff and the local agriculture promotion board, Mr. Tri joined in, hoping that the new crop would help boost his family's income and secure better living conditions. After attending the farmer field school training sessions organized by the project, Mr. Tri applied the techniques that he learned and saw immediate results after planting 200 cocoa seedlings he received from the project between and below existing cashew trees in his garden. Mr. Tri also purchased and planted an additional 400 cocoa seedlings in 2010.

The trees started bearing their first fruit in 2011, and he harvested beans producing over 50kg of dried and fermented cocoa that year. In 2012, the trees produced about 200kg of fermented beans, which earned him around VND10 million (\$500). Tri's cocoa trees continue to grow well and produce mature pods. He expects that the harvest will reach around three metric tons a year from 2014 onwards when the trees are fully grown.

In addition, Tri applied the pruning, watering, and fertilizer techniques he learned for cocoa to his cashew trees and was able to increase the yield of his cashew harvest to 800 kg in 2010, 1,000kg in 2011 and 1,800 kg in 2012. His land now yields produce that brings greater prosperity and opportunity to his family."

Sprinkle in a beneficiary Quote or two.

For example:

"The cocoa trees are an excellent add-on to our cashew garden. Now we have something to harvest throughout the year. This contributes significantly to improving the living conditions of my family and education for my children" said Mr. Tri.

Put the individual story in a bigger picture. How did this make a difference in the community or to the country overall?

For example:

"Mr. Tri is one of thousands of farmers who have benefited from the USAID-supported project to initiate and expand cocoa cultivation in Vietnam. In addition to its support to increase the volume of sustainably-produced cocoa in Vietnam, the project also helps improve the quality at all levels of cocoa value chain and transfer the cocoa development approach to local institutions through training.

Between 2003 and 2008, the project introduced cocoa cultivation to over 17,000 smallholder farmers in four provinces in southern Vietnam - Ben Tre, Ba Ria Vung Tau, Tien Giang and Binh Phuoc. The project was later expanded to include Dak Lak and Lam Dong provinces in the Central Highlands. By the end of September 2012, the number of the project participants from these two provinces had reached 3,400, with 18 percent of them being women and 63 percent of them belonging to ethnic minority groups. In close cooperation with provincial departments of agriculture, extension, and science and technology, the project provided cocoa seedlings and technical training to the farmers.

"Interspersing cocoa trees with cashews has substantially increased the economic efficacy compared to planting cashews only," said Bui Quang Lang, head of Ea H'leo District's Agriculture and Rural

Development Office. "This helps save land area and contributes to plant and cash crop diversity in order to reduce poverty and eradicate hunger."

When the first cocoa seedlings were planted in Vietnam in 2004 as part of the project, there were only 1,600 hectares of cocoa plantings nationwide in the country, mainly at state-owned farms. Currently, Vietnamese cocoa is cultivated on about 17,000 hectares with estimated exports of 2,500 tons in 2011."

Based on the success of cocoa cultivation in helping reduce poverty, the Government of Vietnam has approved a master plan to expand cocoa cultivation to 80,000 hectares and boost cocoa exports to 110,000 tons by 2020.

Photograph: Photographs bring a story to life. The photo should be colorful, depict action, capture people's attention, and feature a main character prominently. Please attach only a .jpg, .bmp, or .gif file with at least 300 dpi (dots per inch) resolution. Please include the photographer's name, organization, and caption for the photo.

Storytelling DOs and DON'Ts

- **Do use powerful statistics** that show a large, specifically defined change; show the change over a specific period of time; and what is achieved at a low cost per unit.
- Don't use statistics that present percentages or numbers with no sense of context or scale.
- **Don't lead with \$\$ amounts.** Telling how many vaccinations were provided, or how many lives were saved is a much more effective metric than how much was spent.
- Do tell stories that showcase a sustainable change.
- Don't tell stories that could represent a one-off success or that aren't connected to a larger narrative or solution.
- Do create emotional/personal connections that bring viewers into the scene.
- Do FEATURE REAL people and quote them

A Few Other Pointers:

Jargon-free Writing. Translate technical jargon such as "capacity building" to "training" or other words that everyone understands, and try to break down development concepts in the same way. These stories are written for the average reader – for your mother and father, a member of Congress, the man in the street – as well as for fellow development experts.

Avoid acronyms: If you can describe it in real words, do so on first reference. Acronyms can be used later, but should be done so sparingly.

For Samples of Success Stories, visit: <https://www.usaid.gov/vietnam/success-stories>